Brian Morris
Civilization And Its Discontents – Critical Reflections On Anarcho-Primitivism
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In a polemical broadside against ‘anti-civilizational’ anarchists (particularly John Zerzan), Brian Morris argues that language, agriculture and advanced technologies are essential to the libertarian socialist struggle, and must be defended against the ‘myth of the noble savage’.

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tradition. Although primitivists and post-left anarchists have long maligned, distorted and misunderstood its politics, while declaring it "obsolete", or as an "outmoded political theory" (Kinna 2019: 144), in fact libertarian socialism is still flourishing as a radical tradition (see Eiglad 2015, Tarinski 2021, Heath 2022).

In contrast, anarcho-primitivism, with its fantasies of a past "golden age" has, it seems, virtually become defunct.

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ural world we inhabit. Through the telescope, vision has given us knowledge not only of the solar system but of the nature of the universe; through the microscope and our vision we now have a deeper understanding of both the physical and biological realms – of subatomic particles, of metabolic processes, like photosynthesis, of cellular life and genetics, and of bacteria and the myriad forms of microorganisms with which we humans share he world. All this is lost on Zerzan, and all this wealth of knowledge, of course, was not available to our hunter-gatherer ancestors, nor to tribal people.

Many scholars besides Bookchin have been highly critical of the wholesale rejection by primitivists of human civilization (e.g. Sheppard 2003, Albert 2006: 178–184, Curran 2006: 42). For with a human population of over seven billion, a rejection of agriculture and technology and a return to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle is simply not an option, if humans wish to continue to exist and flourish on earth.

Epilogue

The social ecologist Murray Bookchin rejected both the Hobbesian myth of "progress" and the myth of the "noble savage", for he recognised that human civilization had been a mixed blessing, and that it consisted, as Kropotkin had suggested, of two distinct "tendencies". These were: a "legacy of domination" and hierarchical control, expressed by shamans, priests, governments and the capitalist economy, and a "legacy of freedom" and resistance, expressed not only in the creative powers of people themselves in establishing social institutions and voluntary associations, but in the struggles of people throughout history for emancipation and autonomy (Baldwin 1927: 146–147, Bookchin 1999: 278).

It is therefore of interest to note that while anarcho-primitivism seems to have lost its appeal in recent decades, libertarian socialism (or what Bookchin called communalism) is still a vibrant political

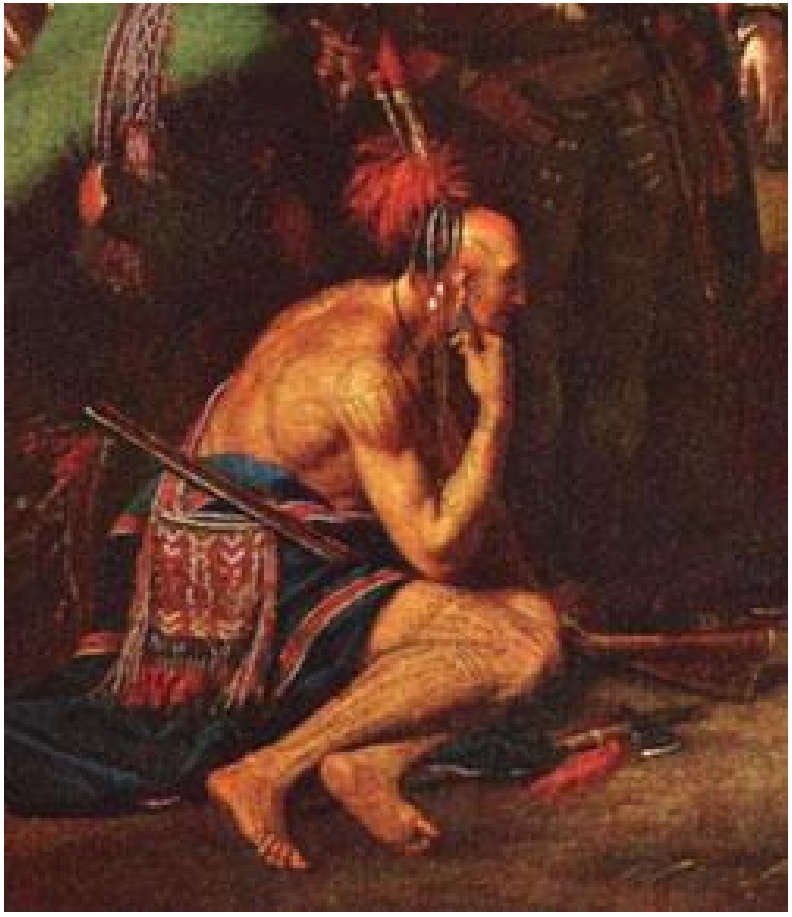
Prologue

In recent decades we have seen an absolute plethora of books published on the topic of human origins, or more generally, on the history of "human kind" – *Homo sapiens* (e.g. Diamond 1991, Harari 2011, Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Amid this proliferation of literature, two kinds of history stand out; they may perhaps be discussed under the rubrics of the "myth of progress" and the "myth of the noble savage".

The first alludes to a depiction of human history as it consists of a single linear progression, a moral and political trajectory of improvement that seemingly culminates in the "rise of the West" and the establishment in the twentieth century of global capitalism and liberal democracy. The "myth of progress" invariably depicts early hunter-gatherers and tribal life generally, in Hobbesian fashion, as being "nasty, brutish and short" (e.g. Chagnon 2013: 7–8, Pinker 2002: 56).

The "myth of the noble savage" entails a complete *inversion* of the myth of progress, for it depicts humans in the late Pleistocene, and hunter-gatherers generally as living in a "golden age" as the Greek poet Hesiod described it; an era of peace, plentitude and ecstasy, free of toil and misery (Hesiod 1988 [c. 700BC]: 40)

Towards the end of the last century a coterie of right-wing anarchists and egoists, having encountered the growing anthropological literature on hunter-gatherers, embraced the myth of the "noble savage" with enthusiasm, declaring themselves to be "primitivists" and as being "anti-civilization" in their politics. They thus claimed, like Hesiod, that our hunter-gatherer past, before the rise of agriculture and the state, had been an idyllic era of peace, virtue and authentic living, without language or symbolic culture, without work and with no sense of time, foragers experiencing, as Hesiod suggested, only the present moment (Perlman 1983, Zerzan 1988, 1994, Moore 1989).



Detail from 'Death of Wolfe' by Benjamin West (1770).

is hard to destroy. As if industrial capitalism is beyond challenge and the only reality. Whither the varied forms of social life that are independent of both the state and capitalism?

Murray Bookchin has made some sterling critiques of the technophobia of the primitivists, particularly Watson, emphasising that their focus on "technology" tends to gloss over the class relations specific to capitalism. He thus stressed that the ecological crisis was more the result of the capitalist economy, plundering the earth in search of profits, rather than technology *per se*, and expressed his conviction that: "Productive and communicative technologies will be needed by a rational society in order to free humanity from toil and the material uncertainties that have in the past shackled the human spirit" (1995, 1999: 177–175).

But Bookchin was not a technocrat – he described himself as a bit of a luddite – and never denied that many technologies are inherently oppressive and ecologically dangerous. Nor did he ever assert that human civilization had been an unmitigated blessing. As he wrote: "Nuclear reactors, huge dams, highly centralized industrial complexes, the factory system, and the arms industry – like bureaucracy, urban blight and contemporary media – have been pernicious almost from their inception" (Bookchin 1995: 34).

We should harness technology, Bookchin felt, to meet basic human needs, but it must be decentralised and reduced to human scale and be appropriate to the creation of an ecological society – one with a co-operative and symbiotic relationship to the natural world, not one of domination (Bookchin 1971: 72–75).

It is worth noting that Zerzan, following Martin Heidegger – his favourite philosopher – not only rejects all technology but also denigrates human vision (Zerzan 2002: 7). Like all primates, vision is of critical importance to all humans, hunter-gatherers especially, and denigrating this sense is quite fallacious. Of course, vision has been employed as a form of control, in relation to panopticon, or for surveillance, but it has also been employed along with technology to enhance our understanding and knowledge of the nat-

technology – all technologies it would appear, that go beyond the subsistence technics (tools) of hunter-gatherers.

The primitivists have a totalising conception of technology, describing it in terms of an "industrial hydra" or a "Leviathan" or as "Frankenstein's monster", or, the favourite, as a global "megamachine" (Perlman 1983, Watson 1999, Zerzan 2008).

Technology of course is a form of knowledge concerned with the design and creation of artefacts that mediate between human life and the material world, enabling humans to solve specific existential problems. Modern technology is based on science rather than on general knowledge. Technology has developed tremendously since humans left the "garden of Eden" and was around long before the emergence of capitalism. Conflating technology with global capitalism, as primitivists tend to do, is quite misleading and unhelpful. Drawing on the writings of Jacques Ellul (1965) and Langdon Winner (1977), David Watson describes technology as that:

Matrix of forces that has now come to characterize modern civilization – the convergence of commodity relations, mass communication, urbanization, and mass technics, along with the rise of interlocking, rival nuclear-cybernetic states into a global megamachine. (1999: 65)

The concept of "megamachine" Watson takes from the writings of Lewis Mumford (1970), although as I have discussed elsewhere (2012: 29–35), Mumford never rejected modern technology, only seeking to situate it in a more ecological setting in a way that enhanced "the renewal of life". Urban life, commodity relations under capitalism, the modern state, technology and symbolic culture are all distinct phenomena, and it is quite unhelpful, if not obfuscating, to conflate them as merely aspects of some completely autonomous global "mega-machine". The primitivists thus present us, in gnostic fashion, with a world consisting only of two spheres; that of the living world, identified with some wilderness, and that of the "the industrial hydra" – the hydra being a marine organism that

The last ten thousand years of human history, after the "fall" (the advent of agriculture) is viewed by primitivists like John Zerzan and his acolytes as not involving in any sense progress, but rather the exact opposite; it has been a period of tyranny and hierarchical control, exploitation and oppression, and humans have become completely estranged from the natural world. Modern civilization is thus rejected by the primitivists in the most totalising fashion as either a "Leviathan "or a "megamachine" (Perlman 1983, Watson 1999).

In his fascinating study *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee* (1991) – the third chimpanzee being of course the human species, *Homo sapiens* – Jared Diamond suggests that our uniqueness as a primate rests on certain cultural traits that have genetic foundations and that in turn give us power. The cultural traits which make humans unique, and which no other primate possess are, Diamond writes, language and the arts (symbolic culture), complex forms of agriculture and tool-based technology (1991: 122).

So, what Diamond and most scholars conceive as unique to the human species – what in fact makes us human – language and symbolic thought, agriculture and technology – Zerzan (and other primitivists) completely reject. For Zerzan views these three cultural traits, in totalising fashion, as completely antithetical to human well-being and flourishing. They express, he claims, only forms of domination and hierarchy, alienating humans from nature.

Zerzan's philosophical outlook is one that is thoroughly gnostic and retrogressive, involving a conflation of the genus *Homo,* which has its origins around 2.5 million years ago, and the concept of modern human, *Homo sapiens* which emerged during what Alan Barnard (2012) calls the symbolic revolution, only around 100 thousand years ago. In essence, Zerzan argues, that to be "human" is to be like the early hominid primate. This means to subsist solely by foraging and scavenging, with only fire, digging sticks and stone tools as technology, and communicating not by language but only

through gestures and some form of telepathy. Zerzan thus rejects all aspects of human civilization – farming, the arts, philosophy, literature, technology, science, urban living and symbolic culture (even spoken language itself!). What a thoroughly dismal vision for humanity (Zerzan 1988, 1994, 2002).

In this present essay I offer some critical reflections on the ideology of primitivism, specifically on the three aspects of human civilization that Zerzan, as the quintessential primitivist, rejects, namely language, agriculture and technology.

I devote a section to each aspect.

1. Language

Language, as well as all forms of symbolic thought (the arts, humanities, mathematics, philosophy, the sciences and all ritual forms), is brazenly rejected by Zerzan in oracular fashion, as he believes that language inhibits humans from experiencing the immediate moment and the natural rhythms and patterns of organic life (it doesn't!). He therefore holds that language, and all forms of symbolism are inherently oppressive, alienating people from the natural world.

In his various essays Zerzan argues that language is in essence an ideology; that it deeply separates humans from the natural world, for as soon as humans utter a word, he writes, they become estranged from nature; that the very act of naming is a form of domination; that language involves a form of reification, in that mental concepts are taken to be more real than actual material things, that it represents a marked shift from the immediacy of experience; and, finally, that language is inherently connected with civilization, empires, technology, instrumental reason and nationalism, and is, believe it or not, the cause of the present ecological crisis (Zerzan 1988: 22–35, 2002: 3–8). This indictment of language is one-sided and unjustified.

It is also important to recognise that farming does not totally *destroy* the environment (as Zerzan alleges), it only modifies the natural world for the purpose of providing humans with their basic needs – specifically food. In many parts of the world before the advent of industrial farming, various farming systems created a very diverse landscape, with a mosaic of different habitats, conducive to the flourishing of wildlife and even to biodiversity. As an inverse gnostic, Zerzan has the impression that all cultural environments are a blight on the landscape, completely unnatural, and devoid of wildlife. This is far from the truth.

What is required at the present time is not to become feral (whatever that may entail) or return to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle (which is simply not an option), nor is it to embrace industrial farming or veganism, which in terms of the earth's ecology and human well-being are also not particularly valid options (Keith 2009). What is needed, as Murray Bookchin and many others have suggested is to develop forms of organic or regenerative agriculture, that combines what is valuable and important in subsistence farming practices with the insights of the biological sciences and agroecology (Tudge 2003, Smaje 2020, Morris 2021).

Rather than reject agriculture, which is what the primitivists advocate (what alternative do they offer?), we should recognise that farming is fundamental to what humans need to stay alive and to make the earth an ecologically viable and attractive place for both human and other life-forms to inhabit. Indeed, as Brian Sheppard insists, deprived of agriculture the majority of the world's population would immediately perish (2003: 18).

3. Technology

Not only rejecting language and agriculture, the anarcho-primitivists, specifically Zerzan and David Watson, also reject

thousands of years before the emergence of empires and states, and that the transition from foraging to farming was a slow, complex and laborious transition for most human populations (Bellwood 2005: 19–21).

Both foraging and farming are modes of production that involve a close and intimate *relationship* with the natural world (*not* alienation from it), and early farmers, like present day tribal horticulturalists and subsistence farmers around the world, also engage in foraging, hunting and fishing. There is no "great divide" between foraging and farming, and several contemporary hunter-gatherers, like the Siriono and Yuqui in Amazonia, were, in fact, once settled agriculturalists.

Early farmers were not estranged from nature, they had a close and symbiotic relationship with the natural world (and their livestock) and like foragers only spent a few hours a day engaged in subsistence activities, The advent of farming did not therefore involve the expulsion of humans from some "garden of Eden", a life of leisurely foraging being replaced by an arduous and gruelling life of farm labour. Collecting yams and hunting in itself is productive *work*, not that very different from the work of subsistence farmers. Early farmers, it has been suggested, instead of generating two thousand calories a day from four hours foraging, produced three thousand calories a day by working four hours in subsistence farming (Sachs 2020: 43).

Anyone who has cultivated an allotment or spent time with present day subsistence farmers – like myself – knows that agricultural work is not necessarily experienced as "drudgery" (Zerzan 2008: 16); it may be viewed as productive, creative and pleasurable, and is often undertaken communally. Moreover, Zerzan also fails to understand that the advent of farming was especially associated with women, as it still is among many subsistence farming communities. It did not necessarily entail gender inequality (see Poewe 1981, Morris 2022).

Language for most scholars (apart from Zerzan!) is a human artefact, a cultural tool that was created by early hominids to enable humans to communicate with one another and to express their thoughts, motives and emotions. Language is central to *human* life, for it is an essential instrument of human thought and a complex form of communication that enables humans both to co-ordinate their various activities and to exchange ideas with one another. It also enables humans to create ratio-empirical understandings of the natural world, as well as to create imaginative mythologies or world views that take us well beyond our own subjective lived experiences (for contrasting approaches to language see Everett 2012, Chomsky 2016).

An undialectical theorist, who continually thinks in terms of extremes and radical oppositions, Zerzan treats language and lived experience as if they constituted a radical opposition. This is quite misleading, as language makes little sense radically separated from human biology. For language is rooted in our basic conceptual understandings of the world (the realm of meanings), which in turn arise from our lived experiences, that is, from our interactions with the material world. There is no language without thought, and no thought divorced from lived experience.

It is quite misleading to regard language only negatively, for it may enhance both our understanding and our immediate experiences of the world. When, for example, I observe a spotted redshank I am also aware that it nests in the Arctic tundra. This knowledge is not derived from my own immediate experience but from reading. That knowledge is not in opposition to my present experience of watching the bird, but rather it enhances that experience. Language can thus enrich human experiences, as every lover of poetry knows.

Language thus enables the development of shared knowledge, and this knowledge may enhance or enrich our immediate experiences of nature. The notion that all systems of understanding are coercive because they rely on language is completely miscon-

ceived. Language may not only enhance lived experience and allow us to generate useful ratio-empirical knowledge; it may also be employed to critique and challenge all forms of hierarchy and domination. Lived experience, knowledge and language are closely intertwined in complex ways – something lost on Zerzan.

In his essays, like Bookchin, Zerzan presents us with a valuable critique of postmodern nihilism, with its overemphasis on language (and texts), and the fact that it virtually oblates human agency. But rather ironically, Zerzan seems to have accepted the postmodernist conception of language as being radically distinct from lived experience; but whereas Derrida, as a linguistic idealist, virtually denies any access to the lived experience except through language, Zerzan repudiates language *entirely*, extolling only lived experience.

Zerzan's notion that once upon a time humans lived in a "non-linguistic" world has rightly been dismissed by one anarchist critic as being based on "wild speculation" (Sheppard 2003: 15).

It is somewhat ironic that Zerzan has argued that writing essays and advocating anarcho-primitivism is the least coercive way of communicating his political vision – a vision that *rejects* language! He is rather like the proverbial naïve lumberjack who is engaged in cutting the branch on which he is sitting.

2. Agriculture

In recent decades agriculture has had a rather bad press and has been rejected not only by Zerzan and his primitivist acolytes, but also by eco-modernists like George Monbiot (2022), who wish to abandon all agriculture and produce all food in high-tech laboratories (see Smaje 2023 for a critique and the advocacy of agrarian localism).

Yuval Harari refers to the agricultural revolution as "history's biggest fraud" (2011:87) – as if agriculture (on which all human beings depend) is to be solely blamed for the rise of empires and for all the institutions of oppression and exploitation that have emerged during the past ten thousand years! Zerzan certainly thinks so.

Agriculture in the broadest sense, like foraging, is a way in which humans have co-operated with and controlled nature in order to produce the basic necessities of life, specifically food and textiles (clothing). It is, I think, quite churlish not to recognise that it is through farming that humans have not only been able to exist, but to expand in numbers, and, at times, even to flourish on earth during the last ten thousand years.

Again, in gnostic fashion, Zerzan set up a completely false dichotomy between foraging and farming: foraging is good, farming is bad. Thus, paleolithic hunter-gatherers, according to the primitivists (and Hesiod) lived a leisurely life in a "golden age" of peace, innocence and contentment, "at one" with nature. I have elsewhere offered a critique of his romantic image of hunter-gatherers (Morris 2012: 248–250; 2024).

In complete contrast, agriculture, according to Zerzan, is a "catastrophe" from which humans have never recovered. For the "logic of agriculture", as he describes it, has put an end to any sensuous enjoyment of nature (untrue!), made work a "drudgery", and along with time and number, farming has led to the complete estrangement of humans from the natural world (also untrue!). Farming has also been responsible, Zerzan suggests, for male violence against women, environmental destruction and all forms of despotism (Zerzan 1988: 63–74).

Holding farming responsible for all the ills of civilization seems a rather warped understanding of human history.

Setting up a radical dichotomy between foraging and farming (as Zerzan does) is completely misleading and it has long been critiqued by both archaeologists and anthropologists (e.g. Harris 1996). Agriculture, the domestication of plants and animals, originated independently in many parts of the world, mainly between 8000 and 3000 BC. What must be recognised is that this occurred